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ABSTRACT

One of the most important questions facing Catholic schools today is how can these schools meet the needs of today's and tomorrow's culture and become a living faith community. Evidence suggests that Catholic high schools have a common mission of academic excellence, faith development, and a sense of community; academic, co-curricular, and religious activities which are designed to further their mission; and a climate that combines caring with discipline. Catholic high schools serve white and minority students as well as poor and rich students in percentages similar to public schools. Guidance services provided at Catholic schools are similar to public schools except that academic course selection and placement are usually not the guidance counselor's responsibility in Catholic schools. Religious and moral education is stressed as a basic attitude behind guidance efforts provided to the students. Catholic high school counselors tend to have less formal preparation than public school counselors although the trend is to encourage personnel to seek formal education. In counseling Catholic high school students, the counselor operates on the principle of "Love thy neighbor as theyself for love of God." Within the context of this framework, the Catholic school counselor must be concerned with Christian values and value judgments. It is suggested that the Catholic school counselor/counselee relationship may differ from the public school. The Catholic school counselor, when faced with issues involving doctrine, ethics, or morality, may tend to recast the counseling problems into a moral framework. Many counseling relationships exist, however, which do not involve moral questions. (ABL)

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COUNSELING AND RELIGION:

HOW THEY MIX
IN A
PAROCHIAL SCHOOL SETTING

CG 019515

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Thomas F. O'Brien
Delivered: April 2, 1985
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ABSTRACT

A CATHOLIC SCHOOL PERSPECTIVE

The twofold purpose of guidance services as they relate to the catholic school community are:

(a) Guidance - which provides the student with information that is necessary in making some decision about the future.

(b) Counseling - which is an interpersonal relationship established with an individual for the purpose of helping the person's adjustment with self or others in light of revealed truth taught by the Roman Catholic Church.

The difference in these two approaches lies in the emphasis on the nature of the relationship of the participants.

The counselor in a catholic secondary school setting usually walks a fine line between the demands of the Catholic Church that supports him/her and the needs within the personal lives of the students entrusted to his/her care. If the needs of the student coincide with the institutionally prescribed beliefs, than any stress related to these beliefs tends to be reduced within the relationship. However, when the personal needs of the student conflict with the catholic institutional beliefs, the counselor bears the burden of the conflict with his/her religious commitment versus commitment to care for the deeply personal needs of the student.

The Catholic Secondary School has as its mission to teach as Jesus did and to increase the love of God and neighbor. Therefore, all members within the school community must be committed to this mission.

Today's world is a world in need. People speak of loneliness, alienation, depersonalization and indifference. They sense the exploitation of some and the manipulation of others. Some feel themselves to be strangers in an unknown world. Seemingly, the world cries out for community and for ties which bind their fellow men and women, for an ordering of human life that brings affection and encouragement, truth and love.

One of the most important questions facing catholic schools today asks how can the catholic school meet the needs of today's and tomorrow's culture. How can the catholic school make faith real in the world? That question implies that academic learning alone is not sufficient. Rather, the school must be, become, a living faith community--one which witnesses the presence and reality of Jesus to and for the culture in which it exists. The school community should shine forth as the living reality of God's love made manifest in Christ. Building community on faith is not an easy task. It requires concentrated effort and clearly envisioned goals. It asks students, teachers, administrators and counselors to get involved in "a mission," namely that of spreading the Gospel message.

A study published by the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) in 1985, reports that two-thirds of all non-public high school students and about six percent of all hig school students in the United States attend catholic high schools. These figures compute to one million of the country's fifteen million students in grades 9 through 12.

Nearly 1,500 catholic high schools are spread across the United States, influencing the educational climate in every state and every major city. Because of their influence and prevalence, catholic high schools need to be known and understood by educators, policy makers, parents and all who are concerned with the total education of youth.

Catholic high schools can be best defined by their similarities and their uniqueness. The common core which binds catholic high schools together includes:

1. A common mission by staff and students who are principally catholic in areas of academic excellence, faith development and a sense of community;
2. Academic, co-curricular and religious activities which are designed to further their mission;
3. A climate that combines caring with discipline.

Thus, the points of commonality in catholic high schools can be summarized as: message, community and service.

Evidence strongly suggests that values of academic excellence, faith development and a sense of community permeates the shared life of a vast majority of catholic high schools. These values are reflected in a school's philosophy and its objectives and goals which are established by a catholic school system where it exists, and by individual catholic high schools themselves. These criteria are evidenced in student requirements, religious activities, in school programming and other school related decisions.

Academic excellence, faith and community are not just ideals; they are real and visible efforts on the part of those within the schools.

With the foregoing information regarding the nature of catholic schools in the United States, let me now address some stereotypes which people think and believe whenever catholic schools are mentioned.

Some stereotypes which come to my mind immediately which are entirely untrue or grossly overstated are:

That catholic high schools are havens for white students whose parents are threatened by desegregation policies of the public schools.

The latest national report on catholic schools indicates the contrary. Nearly the same percentage of minority students are enrolled in catholic high schools as in public high schools. Other research indicates that white students in catholic high schools experience less segregation than their counterparts in public schools. This is because minority students are generally more evenly distributed across the schools in the catholic sector than in the public school sector.

That catholic high schools are operated for economically advantaged students.

Instead, the latest NCEA report on catholic schools indicates that they are accessible to low income students. Overall, the income distribution of families served by the catholic high schools is comparable to the national income distribution for all families. Hence, catholic high schools serve a range of students, from below poverty level to high income.

That catholic high schools are staffed primarily by priests and nuns, thus, shielding the student from people in the world with more experiences.

The 1983-1984 National Survey indicates that lay teachers constitute 77% of the catholic high school teaching force.

That teachers are minimally trained and educated.

The 1985 NCEA report indicates that 47% of the teaching staff hold Bachelor degrees, and some 50.54% hold Master degrees. For many who may lack familiarity with catholic high schools, other stereotypical thinking might also include:

the use of corporal punishment, throwing out students who have problems, rigid classroom environments, praying in school the greater part of the day, elitest attitude among its members and so on.

Just as a matter of clarification, corporal punishment is expressly prohibited for moral, ethical and legal reasons. Regarding students dismissed, NCEA reports in its findings that on the average catholic high schools expel less than 1% of their students, and some even admit students expelled from public schools. I can only add that having spent 18 years in catholic education such stereotypes are an unrealistic picture of catholic high schools today.

Having addressed the nature of catholic high schools and some stereotypical thinking which might exist, let me focus more specifically on counseling and guidance services as they exist in the parochial high school setting.

Factual information about the extent and nature of Counseling and Guidance in catholic and nonpublic schools is almost non-existent. We do know, however, that the largest number of children

attending nonpublic schools are going to church-related or parochial schools. My limited contacts with individuals in public schools and the scant literature available on nonpublic schools have permitted me to make the following observations about the catholic schools' guidance programs compared to public schools' programs.

The nature of guidance services provided in catholic schools tends to be quite similar to that found in public schools; namely, to assist the student in guided direction in a personal, social, emotional and academic way. Guidance services are provided on both an individualized and group basis. Guidance is offered in the areas of career/vocational considerations, job related pursuits, academic pursuits, peer relations, discipline and family concerns.

Within the area of academic responsibility, however, the nature of course selection and placement are usually the domain of a separate office. Teachers play a major roll in the placement of students within courses for the coming year. The counselor tends to act as a guide when course selection is not in line with a student's career goals, or if placement in a course is in question. Since catholic schools tend to emphasize traditional academic programs, their reputation is generally for college preparatory. Another difference seems to lie in the religious and moral education stressed as a basic attitude behind guidance efforts provided the students.

Counselors employed in catholic high schools frequently have less formal preparation than public school counselors and tend to have more counselors employed on a part-time basis. Faculty members in catholic schools who have little or no preparation for counseling are often designated as counselors for one or two periods a day; however, many catholic school officials are becoming

concerned about making better provisions for school guidance and counseling services. These officials are actively involved in strengthening the guidance services offered to students and in encouraging their personnel to secure preparation as counselors. More and more teachers show evidence of seeking more formalized education in guidance and counseling in the present day as opposed to the past. I should like to emphasize one fact, that is, the department heads of counseling and guidance are expected to hold a Masters degree in this graduate major or a related field and that certification is encouraged but not required.

On the average, the counselor-pupil ratio appears to be higher in catholic schools than in public schools. A counselor-pupil ratio of 600:1 for a full-time counselor and 400:1 for a part-time counselor (with perhaps only one or two periods per day) is not uncommon.

The larger catholic high schools are more apt to provide formally organized guidance services than are smaller schools. Such services might include groups on Children of Divorced Parents, Study Skills, Underachievers, Alateen and so on. This observation, of course, holds true for public schools as well.

Regarding the nature of counseling within the catholic high school, it is reasonable to assume that all problems and ills experienced within society exist within the four walls of any catholic institution. Our schools, too, are beset with drug and alcohol abuse among teens, premarital sexual activity, pregnancies, parent divorce and separation, single parent families, sexual and child abuses and the like. The counselor, faced with such problems, is compelled to operate on the principle, "Love thy neighbor as thyself for love of God." Within the context of this framework, the

catholic school counselor in the counseling relationship must be concerned with christian values and value judgments.

In catholic schools today, we find fewer guidance workers and more counselors, that is, fewer members concerned primarily with occupational choice and more involved with growth and development of the individual's personality. Hopefully they do not forget the interrelationship between personality and work.

But does the function of the catholic school counselor differ from the public school counselor in any other significant way? As best as I am able to determine, the answer lies in the very nature of the Counselor-Counselee relationship. Generally speaking, the student counselee is usually not faced with a decision that is perceived in moral terms, and the counselee is not in conflict over the spiritual. When the counselee comes for help, whatever the reason, it is the counselor's professional responsibility to accept the counselee wherever he/she may be.

The counselor in a catholic school being either a priest, religious Brother or Sister, or lay person, when faced with issues involving catholic doctrine, morality, or christian ethics, may tend to recast the problem with a moral framework. However, it would be presumption on my part and yours to assume that counselors in catholic high schools in the initial phases of the counseling process do not resist the tendency to recast the problem into a moral framework. The urgency for establishing a moral framework would depend on the nature of the problem or crisis, and thus the need for an immediate moral decision (i.e. an abortion). This type of crisis by its very nature is contrary to catholic belief and teaching and would warrant more direct and immediate action.

In the usual counseling situations, the counselor attempts to accept and understand the student as he/she is and to communicate this acceptance and understanding to the counselee.

While a number of counselor training programs in the past emphasized the importance of excluding religious values from the counseling relationship, the catholic school counselor has always had to realize that his approach to counseling in a parochial high school setting is neither possible nor desirable.

It is the whole person who comes for counseling, and catholic schools by their mission are charged with the responsibility of educating the whole person. While some students raise questions about values, morals, and the meaning of life, others might come for counseling with a variety of problems. In either case, the person is handled the same--with the same attention, understanding, care and skill. When the problem lies outside the counselor's competence, a careful, wise and prudent referral is made--preferably one which offers the student the greater likelihood to total personal growth.

For anyone to believe that in all or even in most of the counseling relationships in catholic high schools the question of morals or values is posed would be a foolish assumption. On the contrary, many counseling relationships exist where questions of values and moral are never posed. However, the counselor in the catholic high school setting must be able to deal with the spiritual dimensions and aspects of a student's life within the framework and teachings of the catholic church.